



GOD'S MERCY, BEYOND MEASURE

REFLECTIONS ON THE MERCY OF GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES



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THE PREFACE TO THE BOOK

It is just five years down the line when the Jubilee Year of Mercy was proclaimed by Pope Francis in 2015. It was a year when all of us were being invited Christians and non-Christians, men and women, young and old alike, and indeed all people of all cadre to revive and look deeply into its value as we live with one another. Mercy is the first attribute of God.

Towards the end of the year 2016 that is on 20th of November, the year of jubilee was concluded, but this did not and does not mean that we are done with practising Mercy, we are still being reminded to “be merciful like God our Father” (c.f. Luke 6:36), and this is an immortal statement that will stay for ages to come and many generations will recall, teach it and at last put it into practice.

The Public ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ was marked by Mercy. He was the incarnate Mercy of God. Much of the conflict that our Lord had with the religious authority of His time, had to do with the practice of mercy. He Pharisees guarded jealously the law at the expense of Mercy. But Jesus, instead, preferred mercy to legality. The woman who was caught in adultery, was dragged before Jesus. She liable to death according to the Law. But Jesus looking directly into her eyes saw that she deserved mercy and another chance to live. The great beneficiaries of his ministry were those whom the society had pushed to the periphery. The sinners, tax collectors, paralytics, and all the marginalized, those excluded from the public life. It was to them that Jesus revealed the merciful face of the Father. It was for them that Jesus was a true sacrament of God’s mercy. He showed them that they were not abandoned, unloved and uncared for. He lifted them to dignity to show that surely, God still valued them and loved them in whatever their conditions of life were.

This book therefore, has been motivated by Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter “*Misericordia et Misera*.” It is a constant call to be aware of the mercy of God and the situation of man in the broken world. We are called to humility before the mercy of God. It is a call to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ who was perfect image of the merciful Father. As Christians, we are to reflect this aspect of God, we are called to be a sort of Sacrament of God’s mercy in the world.

In this book, we have reflected on different stories of our Lord’s moments encounter with difficult situations and where he preferred mercy to legality. We, too, following the example of our Lord, are called to put the gospel in practice.

INTRODUCTION

When God revealed Himself to the people of Israel, particularly to Moses in the Wilderness, He revealed Himself as a Merciful Father who comes to meet His children in their plight. Mercy is not merely an attribute but the essence of God inscribed on every passage of the Scripture. Mercy spoke through the Prophets and in the fullness of time, Mercy became incarnate in the Person of Christ.

What is mercy? The English Dictionary defines mercy as “relenting; forbearance to cause or allow harm to another. It is forgiveness or compassion, especially towards less fortunate.” For Pope Francis, from his interview that was published in 2016, he defined mercy as the “opening of one’s heart to wretchedness.” He identified mercy with the Being of God. “Mercy is the divine attribute, which embraces,” Pope says, “it is God giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive.” According to Bishop Rodrigo Mejia, Mercy is the “unmerited loving kindness... Unmerited and unexpected grace from God transcending every relationship of reciprocal fidelity.” Mercy is the humility of God to save us. That is, as the Father of the Church once said: that in mercy “God became Man so that men may become divine.”

The image of a Merciful God is best described by Prophet Ezekiel. In the sixteenth Chapter of Ezekiel, Jerusalem is likened to a little girl whose umbilical cord wasn’t cut, who was left in her blood and was cast out. God’s mercy came for her rescue. He washed off her blood, anointed her, dressed her up, and when she grew up, He adorned her with jewels. But she, corrupted by her beauty, became a harlot, not for money but paying her lovers herself. But the Merciful God did not punish her in anger, His only judgement was one filled with mercy and compassion. He raised her above all her sisters so that she would remember and be ashamed when she is forgiven for her sins.

The psalmist says: “If you, Lord, should keep the record of our sins, Lord who could escape being condemned? But with you is found mercy, and for this we revere you.” (Cf Psalm 130:3ff). Mercy does not condone sin. God punishes sinners. When He shows, He does not make the guilty guiltless. Punishment is the character of the God of Justice. Mercy is the character of a God who offers the second chance for the sinner, so that by turning away from his or her sinful ways – may have eternal life. Thus, the mercy and the justice of God, as described by the Fathers of the Church, and in the words of Bishop Rodrigo, “is rather pedagogical and medicinal punishment aiming at the correction of the person, as a father corrects his sons.” It is a “medicinal punishment” that does heal rather than “kill” or send away.

God is Just that is why He punishes offenders. Judgement seeks Justice at the end. God is both merciful but also punishes. How are the two reconciled? There can be a tendency, as you read this book, to think that since God is Merciful, He would not judge. If this holds, then God will not be a God of justice who rewards the

faithful, but punishes the wicked. Contrary, this book asserts that God is a just God who punishes offenders. However, God's judgement is not "punitive" but pedagogical, the one intended to correct and teach a lesson. Jerusalem, for instance in the prophet Ezekiel would be punished, but then placed above all other nations, will be ashamed when is forgiven for her sins.

Christ has called us into the wonderful light of God the Father in Baptism, and commissioned us to reach out to the ends of the world in Confirmation. He has sent us to bear witnesses and to be instruments of God's mercy to others. Pope St. John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter, "*Dive Misericordia*" (Rich in Mercy, 30th November, 1980) affirmed that the Church, the Christians to be precise, "live an authentic life" when they profess and proclaim mercy, the most amazing attribute of God the Creator and *Redemptor*, and when they lead others to the font of mercy."

Pope St. John Paul XXIII, at the opening of the second Vatican Ecumenical Council asserted that "the bride of Christ (Church) prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than arm herself with the weapons of rigor." Pope Benedict XVI, echoed this message, that "Mercy is in reality the Gospel message; it is the name of God Himself, the face with which He revealed Himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of creative and redemptive love. This love of mercy also illuminates the face of the Church.... Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man."

Drawing from both Pope John Paul II, and John Paul XXIII, Pope Francis describes how it is like to be the merciful Church. "Thinking of the Church, *it is like* a field hospital where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded. It is the Church that warms the hearts of people!" Elsewhere he added, "To follow the way of the Lord, the Church is called to pour its mercy over all who recognise themselves as sinners, who assume the responsibility for the evil they have committed, and who feel are in need of forgiveness."

In the Gospel of Mathew, we read this great commissioning words from Jesus: "Go out into the whole world and make all people to be my disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, of the son and of the Holy Spirit." This going out entails communicating the loving Mercy of God who loves and care and desires that all people be saved. However, with abundance of caution! This mission is bound to fail and perhaps has always failed to win people to God, because we might have always preached the ugly message of what God is not. If we move towards those already condemned by sin and by the circumstances of life, and further preach the message of judgement and condemnation, we risk preaching the message of a false God; the God who seems to be indifferent to human suffering, or one who is a sadist, who punishes the already condemned. This is not the God who spoke through Prophets, this is not the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. The God who is revealed is one who is full of mercy, and who in

humility bends to forgive and saves his children rather than punishing them. Like our Lord, Pope Francis says, “The Church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God’s Mercy.”

But sometimes as Christians, either through negligence or ignorance, we have failed to walk the mercy of God, and hence preached by word and deed, and life the ugly message in the lives of others of what God is not. We may have acquired the Pharisaic attitude of judging and condemning others from our lofty heights of our own self-righteousness, and with arrogance, sought to remove the splinter in the eyes of our brothers and sisters while remaining unaware of the beam in our own eyes, (the message of the 12th Sunday, Year A, from Mathew 10:26 – 33) that is, forgetting the fundamental truth that we, too, are in need of God’s mercy.

By reflecting on the life of Jesus Christ, through his ministry the picture of a God who is merciful and who bends too low in humility to save His people is brought to focus. It is the picture of a God whose nature is Mercy, whose name is Mercy, and whose only judgement is one that is full of mercy and compassion. This line reminds me of a certain stanza in certain song from the scripture passage of the Prophet Micah that our God is full of mercy and compassion, and we do sing it during Lenten season (Micah 7:18). And Jesus our Lord and Master teaches and commands us to go and imitate our Heavenly Father in these beautiful words: “Be merciful as your Father is Merciful.”

CHAPTER ONE

NEITHER DO I JUDGE YOU

A line from the gospel of St. John runs this way:

“Then the Pharisees and the Scribes brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So, what do you say?”... Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground. But when they continued to ask him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first one to cast a stone at her.” Again, he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So, he was left alone with the woman before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Sir.” Then he said, “Neither do I condemn you” (John 8:3 – 5, 7 – 10).

My curiosity has always been what Jesus wrote on the ground. Unfortunately, none of the evangelists has written or even given a clue of what Jesus wrote. May be the message wasn’t in what He wrote but what he uttered.

We live in a world where Justice is selectively dispensed. It is an ironical world where sometimes the guilty pass judgement over the innocent. Ours is the world where the tainted judge the innocent. What we see now happening is like what happened during the time of Jesus, those in need of mercy condemn the already condemned. Ours again is a society where the weak are strongly condemned to the point of annihilation, whereas the strong get away with the evils because they can buy their protection at all cost, because some have strong economical muscles, which can be fixed at any time of the day.

Sometimes as we technologically advance, we become spiritual dwarfs to the extent that we lose the ability to follow the route that leads to truth. We become easily tired and harassed by the process that leads to absolute truth, and in order to cover up our weaknesses, like the Scribes and the Pharisees, we take shelter in the legality of the law. “Moses in the Law”, they said, “commanded us to stone such women.” We only live in the letters of the law John says, while we leave its spirit; that is, what is at the centre of the law – love. According to St. John, they said so not in the spirit of truth but so that they could find something to bring the charges against Jesus. They used the law to lay traps for the innocents like Jesus, and to hide their evils like the two elders who accused Susana (C.f Daniel 13:1 – 63 Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

The immediate question that you and I could ask is, where is the man with whom she committed adultery? Where is the man with whom Susana was accused to

have committed adultery with? They are nowhere to be seen, nowhere to be mentioned because theirs was a culture that perpetuated oppression against women. The strong, that is, the “men” committed such crimes, and the custodians of the law let them go Scot free. Instead, the law that should protect the weak condemned the vulnerable, the women to the point of death.

Much has not changed since the time of Jesus. Ours now is the society where a minor thief rots in jail while the powerful get away with their crimes because they make the laws which in principle, no one is above them, but contrary in practice. Ours is the society where a thief will be the first one to cast a stone, a murderer will be the first to draw a sword against the one that is caught. Ours indeed is the society where, like that unremorseful thief on the cross, condemns the just ones.

Yours and mine is the society where judgement is made based on hearsays. The innocents are condemned and since they have no one to defend them, fall beneath the sword of the wicked. Do you remember the story of a young woman called Susana, who refused to give in to the sexual advancements of the two wicked elders? Susana was a God-fearing lady, and when she refused those wicked men’s advancement towards her, they band together, forged false accusations and the two gave false adulterous testimony against her, and being the elders of the people, they condemned the lady to death. Thanks be to God, at this moment, on the way to execution, the young Daniel, a young man full of God’s reverence reversed the condemnation.

Sometimes the innocents in our society have nobody to defend them. William Blackstone once said that, “it is better that ten persons escape than that one innocent to suffer. Our mercy should propel us to be the guards of these innocent ones.”

Ours is a society where we judge and condemn others without understanding the force behind their actions. Do you remember the story of Sarah the daughter of Raquel in the Book of Tobit 3:7ff, the one who was accused and humiliated by her fellow women, as well as her father’s servant’s wives, that she was the killer of her seven husbands? They had no idea that it was Asmodeus, the evil demon that killed her spouses before marriage was consummated.

Looking at Sarah’s story, people never understood what was taking place, and this is a replica in today’s world where everybody is concerned with character assassination of the other. In the story of the adulterous woman, she was dragged before Jesus. Men in their chauvinistic bias, with stones filling their hands big and small alike, ready to throw them and with high rage they were ready to shed the blood of the woman, and that is why they were courageous enough even to quote from a prophet: “Moses decreed that such one is to be stoned to death! What do you say?” Jesus Christ refused to be part of the mob psychology; this is wisdom at work, which we see in Daniel when he brought back the assembly so

that he could re-examine the two elders who accused Susanna. I do not know how to capture this part, but I will try to use the words of Paul Klee when he said that, “one sees the other fails.” I think this is fitting with Daniel’s and Jesus’ stand. Daniel and Jesus refused to take sides with the oppressive society. This is purely how God treats us.

A story is told of life in the Ascetic community by Joan Chittister, in her book *In God’s Holy Light* that there was a day a brother committed sin in the monastery and the seniors assembled and sent for Abba Moses to come and excommunicate him from the community. He (Abba Moses), however, did not want to go. Then the priest sent a message to him saying, “Come, everybody is waiting for you.” This old sage finally got up to go. He took a worn-out basket with holes, filled it with dry sand and carried it on his back. While still at a distance, some brothers ran to welcome him. They were shocked and confused at seeing the leaking sand on the Old sage’s back. “What’s this Father?” Then the old man said, “See, my sins are running out behind me, yet I do not see them. Yet you have called me today to come and judge the sins of someone else.” Upon hearing this, the brothers fell at the feet of the Abba Moses and cried for mercy. They pardoned the young brother and the case was finished.

Saint Benedict of Nursia talking about the qualities of an Abbot of the monastery said, “Let him prefer Mercy to Judgement” (Rule of Benedict 2). Daniel in his symbolic judgement of separating the two elders he never bothered dig the past of Susanna. Jesus symbolically also writing on the ground, never dug the past history of the woman. Here also Abba Moses, following the footsteps of Daniel and Jesus, did not dig the dark history of the brother in the Ascetic community. Abba Moses in his wise symbolic judgement, like Jesus who said, “The sinless of you to cast the first stone”, used the leaking sand behind him to condemn the accuser.

Reading and living out the Gospel, calls on us to shield our conscience from the malice of the mob psychology that though itself is in need of mercy keep pointing the accusing finger to the already condemned by the law. What comes on your mind when you see a prisoner serving a life-sentence? What comes on your mind when you see the so called “prostitutes” (who are always women) in our society? What does your conscience tell you when you see a homosexual, or one who has committed adultery, or even one who has procured abortion? These matters are prohibited in the Christian community; they are profane and should not be said or even be heard. But we cannot deny them; it is a reality in our vicinity. These people form the congregations in our pews; these are the cases we encounter in our pastoral ministry or apostolates. These are the people we share offices with, and also our sons and daughters share learning institutions with them. How do you approach them? Do you too, like the Jews drag them to public shame? Do we

behave like the two who brought Susanna to the assembly or like the Jews who drag the woman to Jesus?

Unfortunately, ours is a society where great men and women who have misused and abused others – judge them after dumping them. “The crude, rough – mob of self-righteous men shoving, pushing, dragging the poor dishevelled woman across the square.” She stands for those young men and women who have been used and abused by others. Basil Pennington in his book *Living in the Question*, reminds us of the Pharisaic tendency of the arrogant, carping old Pharisees exposing others to public shame so that they can justify their own selfish, jealous ends. Reading this statement from Basil it really says a lot. It is quite unfortunate that ours is the society where *the law condemns the weak and protects the powerful*. Going back to Jesus’s society, it was a society where the law was tilted to condemn the women while it remained silent over men. One question we need to ponder on is; where was the man with whom she committed adultery with? Basil says that “he probably went on his merry in sinful way. Or maybe the fellow was courageous enough to join the stoning crowd. Or maybe he lurked in some corner nearby curious to see the outcome.” Another question we need to ask ourselves is: was the man a high-ranking person in the society that is why he could be above the law? At least you and I know of the female prostitutes, where or who are the male prostitutes?

Whereas I am slow not to pass judgement over the case because am not an expert or an authority, neither do I presume to give a verdict or a principle of conduct concerning the matter, yet my only message to you is this: By law and constitution many brothers and sisters stand accused, condemned and liable to jail, you and I being the visible images of Christ, what will we do? Do we join the Pharisaic attitude of “the law requires that she or he be stoned to death?” Will we stand to be different and take the attitude of Daniel, Jesus, Abba Moses or Benedict, and prefer Mercy to judgement? Will we join those who know how to investigate into the past, those who dig the dark history just to use it against the already condemned? Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you.”

Mercy over Judgement

Judgement is driven by the spirit of legality and Justice whose end is more or less the same as perfection. Mercy reminds us that perfection, at least in the human community is simply unattainable. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility as human beings to become the best human beings we can possibly be, as Sr. Joan explains it in her book, “one insight, one mistake at a time. Then knowing the struggle that comes with trying and falling over and over again, we become tender with others who are also struggling in the process.” Our tenderness should remind us that when we point a finger at the other the pain is on us, because the three fingers point back to us while only one finger points to the other. That is why there is always pain in the joints when we fold our finger to accuse ourselves. Showing

mercy, not judgement is an inner correction that lightens the heart. This is not that easy. It comes with the courage of meeting face to face with the reality of your own weakness. “The sinless among you to cast the first stone.” They dropped their stones and left the scene one after the other, beginning with the eldest of them. One thing that fascinates me in the story is the genuineness of the accusing crowd. They saw how wicked they were before God, they realized that they too, were in need of God’s Mercy, and upon realising this they left the scene without a single stone thrown at the lady.

Talking about dropping down the stones, we can equate this one with accusations against the woman being dropped. Here we see a good teaching which the elders showed the young by being the first to drop their stones. This is a lesson that the young ones learn from the elderly. It is upon us with the elders to teach the young ones the correct way of doing things. The way Abba Moses taught the young brothers who called him to give his verdict on the accused brother. With a simple statement from him: “My sins are running out behind me and I don’t see them,” he taught an irreplaceable lesson.

Mercy is a wakeup call which reminds us that we, too, are beggars of God’s Mercy. Jesus said, “Judge not, and you will not be judged.” And upon this realization we become tender with others who are also struggling in the process of becoming fully human, that is, Christlike. Just as the sins of this “adulterous woman” became a mirror which reflected the true picture of the arrogant carping Jews’ ‘wickedness; the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters are constant reminders of our human limitations. As we strive to seek mercy, we need to translate it in how we deal with others.

It is our Christian duty imitating our master, to show mercy and love to the so called “prostitutes”, “errands”, “addicts” and all those whom the society relegates to the peripheral. In this way we win them to the love of Christ. The recipients of Christ’s mercy followed him and they were enlisted among his disciples. We too, by showing them mercy we enlist them to the rank of the beloved children of God. Pope Francis at the conclusion of the extraordinary Year of mercy wrote: “Nothing of what a repentant sinner places before God’s mercy can be excluded from the embrace of His forgiveness. For this reason, none of us has the right to make forgiveness conditional.” And since we are the recipients of God’s unconditional mercy, neither should we condition mercy of those who seek it.

CHAPTER TWO

WHICH ONE IS THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT?

It is always a joy to contribute our expertise in the field we are much acquainted with. This is what we are seeing here when this scholar of the law stood up to test Jesus and said,

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he was asking this one from the legal view point. Jesus going a notch higher, taking him from the legality of things to the spiritual realm, replied to him and said, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” He said in reply, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus journeying with him on same law’s view point, replied to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.”

Still stuck on the law’s view point, he wished to justify himself, and so he continued with his question and posed this to Jesus: “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus never answered his question directly, but instead replied it with a parable:

“A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise, a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveller who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over the wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, Take care of him. If you spend more than I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back. Which of these three, in your opinion, was a neighbour to the robber’s victim?” He answered, “The one who treated him with Mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Looking at the capitalistic society that is characterized by this philosophy of “*self-sufficiency, self-sustainability, and independency*,” we still see this philosophy being practiced within our Christian community. It is whereby we cherish this philosophy of *survival for the fittest*. It is a society where everyone is for him and *God for us all*, and everyone does whatever he wishes without caring about what the other one feels. Paradoxically, this is where Christianity finds itself.

We live in a world that is divided and ruled by racism, tribalism, nepotism among other social evils. We live in a world whereby social classes take upper hand. And this is how the division goes: the rich and the poor, the haves and have-nots, whites and blacks, them and us, Christians and non-Christians. Ours is the society divided and threatened by individualism. But also, it is in this world that we profess and live our baptismal vows, as well as evangelical counsels for the consecrated men and women.

The question has not gone away, neither do we intend it to go away. It was the question that was asked since time immemorial and it is being asked today: “*What is the greatest commandment?*” And Jesus replied by asking another question, “*What is written in the law? How do you read it?*” The answer which all of us should arrive at despite our social standing in our society should be the Love of

God, and that of the neighbour. This Love sums up the message of the Law and the prophets. Love is at the heart of worship. And the law of God is – love, in fact, Jesus commanded his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Unsatisfied with the response of Jesus, perhaps, or maybe seeking self-justification, the lawyer challenged Jesus, “*And who is my neighbour?*” Jesus gives a story of a man who fell victim to robbers. The man was beaten and badly wounded and was left nearly dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Lucky enough, a priest, a servant of God happened to travel on the same road. When he saw the man, he squeezed himself on the opposite side of the road and went his way. A Levite also came and when he saw him, likewise passed by on the opposite side of the road. Then there came a Samaritan, the number one enemy of the Jews, an impure man, the abominable Jewish rebel, an impure race. But when he caught sight of the wounded man who was neither his relative nor friend, he practiced what he knew better. He did the following things: he washed, treated and bandaged his wounds, and mounted him on his own donkey and took him into the guesthouse. He stayed with him and continued ministering to him that night. Leaving him in the safer hands next day, he committed himself to pay extra cost which the victim would have used. This shows that he was ready and willing to accomplish the mission he started of helping the wounded man.

Whenever we read this story in the pages of the Gospel of Luke, every sentence breed forth a new insight. Let us break from the theological exegesis of the story and think together in a lay man’s language. It is not clear but it seems that the victim was a Jew. The man was victimized on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. You and I know what Jerusalem means, the Temple, the centre of worship, and indeed the focal point of the Jewish community. Therefore, it is a road to Holiness. Ironically, it is on this holy road that a person was attacked. The second thing is that the first man who happened to travel the same road was a Priest. We may ask, *why the priest?* The answer is a matter of assumptions: perhaps Jesus wanted to teach about true service to God! Unfortunately, this servant of God passed by on the opposite side when he saw him. The second person was a Levite. Why a Levite? The Levite is from the priestly family, a consecrated people by and for God service. They were a people set aside to minister in God’s sanctuary. Unfortunately, he too, like the priest, passed by on the opposite side and went away.

Jesus not yet done with the scholar of the Law, hits the ears of this Jew by mentioning the Samaritan. From the story of the Samaritan woman, evidently, we see how the Samaritans were being looked down upon by the Jews. We can see this as an undertone in the woman’s reply to Jesus’s request: “*You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan – so how can you ask me for a drink?*” Samaritans were the “impure” Jews who intermarried with the foreigners and worshipped at a shrine on Mt. Gerazim instead of Jerusalem. This notwithstanding, the Jews will not use

the same cups and bowls that the Samaritans used. But Jesus used this “abominable” Samaritan figure to demonstrate the compassion of God.

Picking up from our story from Luke’s Gospel, the question is: Why did the Priest not help? Perhaps he was late for the service. Perhaps as a priest he was afraid to touch blood lest he be defiled, hence making himself unclean. The priest was faced with a choice between legality and mercy. The law prohibited a priest from touching blood, yet there lay on the roadside someone who was at the point of death. The priest must have felt pity for him but just felt helpless since the priestly laws forbade them to touch dead bodies which he might have thought that the man was dead. We are not sure whether this was on his mind.

The Good Samaritan story reminds me of another story once told concerning two desert monks. The law was passed in the monastery that no monk was supposed to touch a woman. One day, two monks were sent on a journey by their superior, and it happened that they came across a woman who was unable to cross the river. Here mercy and Law were put on a weighing scale. One monk offered to break the monastic rule and carried her on his back and helped her to cross the river. The other monk was greatly distressed that his brother had broken the ascetic rule. Giving back the report of their journey to their superior when they reached the monastery, the other monk reported the one who carried the woman on his back. “My brother broke our ascetic rule, which forbids us touching women, yet he went even further not only touching but carrying her on his back.” Then the accused monk replied, “O my brother, I carried the woman and left her on the other side of the river. But for you, you have carried her and brought her to the monastery in your mind.”

The above-mentioned story is so hilarious, but the bottom line is that it passes a very powerful message between legality and mercy. As a priest, as a Christian, and as consecrated men and women, our service to God is service to humanity, for truly we cannot serve the God whom we cannot see unless we serve the people we see, and more especially, those who are in need. The priest in the story of the Good Samaritan missed the opportunity of giving his service to the needy victim, thus, missed to serve God in the needy. How many times, as Christian, have you and I, bypassed a sick person by the roadside in pretext that we are late for mass, or for work? Many at times we bypass women carrying their children under the scorching hot sun, and we see them and accelerate because we are late for mass or for work or for our religious obligations. Don’t you think we bypass God on the road and we rush to an empty church? For surely, Christ, on judgement day will say to us, “I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and gave me no water to drink, and naked – never clothed me [...]. Whatever you did to those in need, you did it to me.”

Our sick brothers and sisters in our society, our religious communities, the sick people in our families, could be our parents, our brothers and sisters, neighbours

or even strangers who knock on our doors for food – these are opportunities for us to serve God. It reminds me of the childhood stories told at Sunday school. There was a man who was a great friend of God. One day he invited God to his house. God promised to visit him the next day. The man went home, cleaned the compound, spread the red carpet and prepared nice meal for God, and sat waiting for Him. At around midday, a dirty mad man in rags came knocking on his gate. When the man opened the gate and saw the mad man, he sent him away with stones. But the man kept coming back to knock on the gate begging for food. But the man at last, hit the mad man with a stone and killed him. He went and buried him secretly and kept waiting for his prominent guest to come. When evening came and God had not come, he was disappointed and went to his bed. That night he did not pray. When he slept, in his dream he kept seeing the madman crying at his gate. When he took a stone to throw at him, the mad man was God in disguise and told him, “behold I came to visit you, but you stoned me to death.” At these words, the man woke up, went to the grave where he buried the madman, and to his amazement found the grave empty.”

With this little story we see how sometimes we miss the opportunity of offering our service to God. Remember sometimes God speaks to us through those in need of our compassion.

But this Levite! I do not know why this character keeps nagging at me. Let us reflect on him. Why did he not help the victim? The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known to be dangerous for lonely travellers. Maybe the Levite said to himself, “This man knew how dangerous this road is for lonely travellers, why did he pass here alone?” It is like choosing something deliberately while knowingly Crystal-clear of its danger. Do you really need sympathy when you deliberately put a hot iron rod on the raw wound?

We are surrounded by all kinds of social injustices that challenge our attention. The poor who are downtrodden, those who are denied justice by the oppressive system. Around us are people who are falsely accused, perhaps we know the truth. Are we going to remain silent and give these injustices of our society a blind eye? Unfortunately, most of us baptized and faith practicing Christians would hardly stand to challenge the oppressive society. We are comfortable inasmuch as it is not our right that is denied or disrespected. We guard our mouth and keep them shut from speaking the truth, lest we be implicated in cases. In this way, we see the poor stripped off their dignity.

In our silence and in our cowardice not to challenge the system we lie and console ourselves that we are only responsible for what we say or do. I think this is not true. We are not only responsible for what we say and do, but also for truth that we don't say. Jesus Christ, because nobody stood in his place and testified to his innocence, he was crucified under the false witnesses and accusations. This is an evidence that silence in the face of truth is the only necessary factor for evil to

thrive. If we cannot speak to defend the rights of the voiceless, we join the oppressive system to condemn the weak. Bishop Romero once said, “A church which is not united with the poor and does not denounce from the perspective of the poor the injustices committed against them – is not the true Church of Christ.” I think that God really feels hurt, not by the wicked men and women who despise the rights of the poor, but by the good Christians who remain silent when the innocents are condemned.

Who is this Good Samaritan in our lives? First and foremost, Jesus Christ himself fits in the Good Samaritan role. We are unmerited recipients of God’s mercy. In our sinfulness, our destiny is Hell, but God in His Mercy sent His son to redeem us by dying on the Cross. In the same spirit, we are called upon to be the recipient givers of God’s compassion, of God’s Mercy.

We are surrounded by many people as there are many needs. There are victims of racism, tribalism and even religious persecutions. There are within our own vicinity victims of terrorism. There are victims of sexual assaults who have been left traumatized. There are those who cannot afford a single meal per day and they keep knocking on our doors. We are neighbours and fellowship members with the oppressive rich men and women who perhaps deny their house helps dignity or mistreat them. What is our message to them? Ours is a message of love. Bishop Romero still come back to us with his message: “To the oppressor the Christian speaks the message of criticism and challenge them to conversion; and to the oppressed a message of peace and hope.”

Some people come to us, not because are in need of material support from us. Instead, they need a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on or a pat on the back with these words: *all will be well*. Only this! It means that no one can claim to have nothing to offer. Nobody is so poor that he or she can’t offer something, according to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We can offer our time, our attention and love. By listening attentively and by being in sorrow with sorrowful, in tear with those who cry, we are able to console, and thereby wiping the tears of those in pain, bandaging the wounds of those who are hurt.

It is by learning to ease the crosses of each other that we encounter God in each other. It is by helping each other that we become the instruments of God’s mercy. Do you remember Simon of Cyrene? The man who was forced to help Jesus carry the cross to Calvary. He might have grumbled and complained within. Little did he know that he actually helped Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. Imagine he helped God to carry His Cross.

Basil Pennington analysing the day-to-day activities of Mother Teresa, better known as her apostolate, once said that the saintly mother, found a man who had been left on the street almost dying, and the rats had eaten him. The maggot had also eaten away his flesh right down to the bones. Mother Teresa took away the

man from the Streets and devoted herself wholeheartedly in caring for this man. It is reported that she took over an hour washing and bandaging the wounds of the old man. When she finished, and she was soothing his face with a cool cloth, the old man opened his eyes and said, “Thank You.” And he died. Mother Teresa went and prostrated herself before the altar and when she was asked, she had this to say: “This morning I had the privilege of caring for the dying Christ.”

Our Christian calling which we see practiced so well by Mother Teresa and others, it is a call to stand in the place of God for the rest of humanity, and from that we radiate God’s compassion to the society. It is a call to be the heart through which God loves the broken world, the feet on which God reaches the needy, the hands with which God touches the world, and the eyes with which God sees the needs of world. Being an instrument of God’s mercy, God’s grace, is, for me, the solemn act of worship, the greatest commandment.

The parting shot to the Lawyer, Jesus challenged him to go and do likewise. Let me put myself in the shoe of this lawyer. In the world threatened by individualism, racism, tribalism, political ideologies that perpetrate negativity and exclusion of the other who differ with us in ideologies; being a Christian is a vocation to be a sacrament God’s compassion. This is what Jesus meant: “Go and do likewise.” I would like to borrow a leaf from **Pope Francis** in his work *“The Joy of the Gospel”* when he uttered a sentiment similar to this. God’s compassion for Francis is compared to a Church that goes out. This Church should be the kind that get involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; to bridge distances, that will abase herself if necessary, and embrace the human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. The Good Samaritan did not just feel pity or sympathy with the victim, but got involved and shared in the pain of the victim. He wiped and bandaged the wounds, thereby offering best adoration ever, just like Mother Teresa who served and saved the dying Christ.

Putting things into perspective, the recent happenings that have robed human life like the corona virus, police brutality which can be cited from different continents, call for an atmosphere where Mercy needs to take precedence, an atmosphere that goes out and seeks others.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW OFTEN MUST I FORGIVE HIM?

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?’

It is a reality of being human to hurt and being hurt. But how you respond to whomever and whatever hurts you is what determines how happy and at peace you are with everyone and everything. We respond differently when we are hurt. Some of us would react on the spot by retaliating. Others will simply keep quiet

and will look for an opportunity to fight back. Others will keep it in heart and will keep pondering on it for as long as they live. This is the most dangerous and joy-denying thing, because Memory imprisons and hurts people more than the real enemy in their vicinity. While still others, like Peter, will forgive but would keep the number of times they have forgiven. We are always, like Peter, tempted to quantify our acts of forgiveness. “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered him, “I say to you, not seven times but Seventy – seven times.” (Cf. Matt. 18:21 – 35). Jesus wanted to teach Peter and is also teaching us that True forgiveness is unquantifiable, it is without measure.

Talking about forgiveness, I once had an opportunity of giving a recollection to a group of choir members of a certain Parish, and among the topics of the day, was forgiveness. When time came for us to explore on Forgiveness, I made it an open forum for people to share their experiences on this topic. In the group, two people volunteered to share: a lady and a man. They shared their concrete stories how this forgiveness was a challenge for them.

The lady said that one day she disagreed with her fellow choir member with whom she sung the same voice, soprano. Unfortunately, they sit next to each other in the choir. The leadership tried to reconcile the two warring members but it didn’t work. She told the group how hard it was for her to extend her hand during mass for a sign of peace. Anytime she saw the other lady, she said, she felt hurt and the memory of what she did to her became fresh. Even without the other one saying a thing she would be hurt seeing her. The worst of all, she said, was that she felt bad whenever she saw her “enemy” sharing and laughing with the other members of the choir. She always thought that they were gossiping about her. Her emotions were literally controlled by the other. She would be happy sharing light moments with her friends, but her moods changed immediately the other one entered the scene.

When time came for the man to share, he had this to say: his friend was cheating with his wife. When he discovered, he asked him and he accepted that he had been having an affair with his wife. This problem made him to separate with his wife. The man who had an affair with his wife came to seek forgiveness from him which he did but half-heartedly. Since then, that closeness to each other was no more. Furthermore, although he moved on and married another wife, he still felt bitter with his friend.

Although he forgave his friend, but still we can see that forgiveness was not fully forgiven. That is how forgiveness is a challenge for these two people, and also it might be a challenge for me as I read this story.

Forgiveness is not an easy topic neither is it something easy to give. Above all else forgiveness is a divine act that requires God’s grace. Forgiveness as a divine

act comes from a realization that God has forgiven us unconditionally and we are expected to reciprocate or extend to others. Jesus's parable of unforgiving servant taught that God is a merciful Father who expects us to show mercy to others. "Be merciful as your Heaven Father is Merciful." Reading the Old Testament, Moses also told the Israelites to be compassionate with strangers in the Promised Land, reminding them that they were once strangers in Egypt.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing to give as we have already cited. Through the lips it is easy "I have forgiven you...but" The problem comes when we add "but." This is the challenge that we need to overcome so that the phrase "I have forgiven you" stands alone without "but." In the Holy Scripture we are reminded to forgive and forget. It is easy to forgive but not easy to forget, but also unless you forget it is as good as not forgiving; why? Because the memory of the past, memory of an injury that someone caused you remains as a wound to remind you the extent to which you were hurt. And the more you remember the more it becomes fresh. Memory makes you permanently available in the past life, and makes you unaware of your present and eventually your future strolls in and you are caught in an identity crisis. The result is regret and bitterness over, not what you did but what you missed when you had an opportunity and time. Let me tell you another story.

A certain man brushed shoulders with his father and he decided to live far away from his family. For many years, his father sent a word for him to come home and be reconciled, but his pleading with the son heed to the deaf ears. Eventually his father fell sick. He again, on his deathbed, sent a word to his son to come home but the man stood his ground. When he finally made up his mind to come home, he found his dad already dead and buried a month ago. However, before his dad died, he left a letter that was confidential only to be read by this estranged son. On his arrival at their home, the first thing he was given was this sealed letter left for him by his late father. Opening it he found these words inscribed in it: "My Son, I know it will grief you when you open this letter to read, but take heart, you must read it anyway. I hold nothing against you, and I loved you so much as the most responsible young man, a son of my own flesh. This letter is a top secret between me, you and your late mother. You know that you are seven children of mine. That is what you know. But this is the truth. Of the seven of you, you are the only legitimate and biological child of mine. The rest belong to another man that your mother told me on the day she died. My son, for many years I have looked and hoped to see you back and reconciled to me, but you didn't give me a chance. Am glad that though you didn't physically come, you have at least come and we are reconciled through this letter. I forgave you my son, and I am happy that you are back to take care of my property. I have written a will and given it to our family lawyer. Everything is signed in your name. Peace, my son. Now I can rest with your ancestors in peace. Yours in loving memory, your Dad."

The Son read the letter with immeasurable immensity of pain. He wept bitterly in his room. He regretted not to have met his father physically and apologised. At least his father had apologised in his letter. What about him? Would he apologise to the grave? Would he stand before the portrait of his father on the wall that looked at him smiling? He sensed an angry ghost of his father around the room. In his mind he created a picture of his father crying for him, but in reality, his father was no more. It took him long time to let go, he had to visit a psychiatrist for psychotherapy but was not easy, until he shared with a certain priest who recommended a family healing mass to reconcile and integrate the man in the family.

In several occasions when we differ or disagree with our friends, we are always tempted to frame them as our number one enemies. And every time we see them we become bitter and are denied peace of mind. And we think that they are our problems. Sometimes it happens that even “those enemies” who hurt us forgot and moved on with life. Or they asked for pardon but we hardened our hearts to let go and forgive them, embracing their loving relationship again. We did so thinking that we would be punishing them, only to realize that we punished ourselves. Lack of forgiveness is a prison of bitterness that we bring upon ourselves. And this self-furnished prison hurts us more than it does to people or someone who hurt us. Mark Twain calls it “An acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which is stored than anything on which is poured.” This is because, as Sr. Joan Chittister, says, “anger eats out our inside. It refuses to let go of old hurts and new fears until our hearts go to the dust from the raging flames it lights within us.”

Lack of forgiveness makes us prisoners of ourselves first, then of others. It makes us erect walls around us and shield ourselves from others in hope that inside these “walls” we would find peace and happiness. But the reality of being human forces us otherwise. It is the very nature of human beings to be and live in family with others, and in this, happiness is assured. Walls of isolation bring bitterness, self-rejection and eventually, depression, because within these walls, we tend to think that nobody loves us, and nobody understands our pain. Actually, it’s not the enemy next door that is the greatest obstacle to our happiness or to our peace of mind; it is rather how we deal with the enemy in the next door that determines the quality of our lives. Happiness is the fruit of the degree of peace of mind and the contentment, or the acknowledgement of our weaknesses and our contributions to our own wounds.

Just as Jesus told Peter and his audience, “So will my heavenly Father Do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Matt. 18:35). Again, elsewhere he said to the Apostles when he had risen from the dead: “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn.20:23). Several occasions, I have heard many people say, “*I will forgive you in heaven.*”

Might be you have also said a similar word like this. I do not think that Heaven is a place for forgiveness. How we deal with each other here on earth, as Jesus categorically puts it, determines either our entry in heaven or not.

Forgiveness is the password of heaven. When God wished to have us reconciled to Him and gain entry to heaven, He sent His son, Jesus Christ, whose life became an expiation for our sins. God forgave us our sins through His son's death on the cross and He expects us to be the recipient givers of forgiveness. In the Lord's Prayer we have this beautiful phrase: "*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*" Have we ever stopped and reflected on these words of Jesus? You See! Sometimes we pray this prayer without paying attention to what we speak to God. We ask God to show us mercy because we ourselves are merciful to our brothers and sisters around us.

If there is ever something that this broken world is in need of, is this thing called forgiveness. Our world is characterised by men and women living next to each other but are like lifeless and emotionless objects. We live together in the same roof but we are strangers to each other. We are like corpses sharing same morgue but does not benefit one another. We walk passed each other like strangers would do on a busy street in town. Because we hold grudges against each other and we are bitter with everyone around us. We envy each other's successes and plan everything possible to bring them down. By so doing, envy takes joy out of our lives, and makes everyone's life poisonous to our own. **Corrie Ten Boom** said that "forgiveness is the key that opens the doors of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is the power that breaks the chains of bitterness and shackles of selfishness."

For those of us with a hesitant heart to forgive we find life very boring and meaningless. It is the feedback that life gives back to us when we hate others. Someone said, that Hatred paralyses life; only love releases it. Hatred confuses life in the world, only love brings harmony to it. Hatred darkens life; the love that compels us to forgive unconditionally illuminates life.

More than anything else, the human society needs unconditional forgiveness and love. Whether white or black, European or African, Asian or American, we are all human, and are capable of hurting and being hurt by others. It is a dimension of being human, and we grow to know, appreciate our distinctiveness and are moved to love each other.

Forgiveness is a free gift from God and we are expected to gift it freely to others. One thing that is clear about the nature of life is that our personal and collective success is always tied up on the "other." Therefore, when we brush shoulders, as an Apostle said, "Do not allow your anger causes you to sin, neither shall you let the sun set on the East while still holding a grudge against your brother. Do not give the Devil an opportunity." When you are hurt, regardless of the magnitude

be the first to initiate the process of reconciliation, the process of healing your own wound. Forgiveness arises from your need to be at peace with yourself and your neighbours.

Lastly, imagine having ten people who hurt you and you failed to forgive them. In the future when you are in need of help, you are to avoid them. But if you forgive them, they are the first avenues for your help. Forgiveness widens the horizon for the opportunity of your success, while lack of forgiveness narrows your opportunity to succeed in the future. Forgiveness brightens your future while lack of forgiveness darkens your future. The weight of forgiveness is lighter than the burden of unforgiving heart.

It is really quite impossible to be a Christian without forgiveness. In fact, our coming to be Christians was necessitated by forgiveness. Pope Francis asserts this in his Apostolic Letter “*Misericordia et Misera*” that “Forgiveness is the most visible sign of the Father’s love, which Jesus sought to reveal by his entire life. Every page of the gospel is marked by this imperative of a love that loves to the point of forgiveness.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“...THAT SHE IS A SINNER”

The social nature of Jesus Christ, made it easy for Him to mingle with various types of people. This day he was invited to dine with a Pharisee. He came and reclined at table with them. Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. She brought with her an alabaster flask of ointment, she came and knelt at his feet of Jesus weeping, and she began to bathe them with her tears. She wiped them with hair, kissed and anointed them with the ointment she carried along. Then the Pharisee hosting Jesus, when he

saw this, said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would have known which type of a woman this lady is (Cf. Luke 7:9).

We as human beings are too quick to pass judgement over others, situations or circumstances of life. And this is not bad, because as rational beings we have been given the ability to discern between what is good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood. But sometimes blinded with its own pride, human reason, which is a tool that enables us to discern, goes beyond its limits and enters the domain that is proper to God only, that of passing ultimate judgement over the value or the usefulness of others. When reason trespasses its limits, it errors in judgement and as a result we exclude others in our rank, terming them as evil, bad, spoilt, sinners, illiterate, useless or good for nothing, black or white, primitive or elites, better than or worse than us. In most cases, others suffer because of our judgements. Others are even excluded in the very house of God's Mercy – the Church.

In the Gospel passage quoted above, the Jews had categorised the woman as sinful, and because of this, they thought she had no right and not even that privilege to be in the presence of a man like Jesus who was a prophet. She even had no right to access the Merciful face of God because of her sinful nature. "If this man were a prophet," they thought, "he would have known the type of woman touching him." Do you suppose that Jesus didn't know the status of this woman? Jesus was not only a prophet but also God, who could read the hearts of men and women and discern their thoughts from afar. Despite this, He allowed the "Sinful woman" not only to touch her, but to let her tears of contrition drop on his feet. He also allowed "the sinful woman" to wipe his feet with her hair, kiss and anoint them with the ointment she had brought. In essence, Christ allowed this sinful woman to minister to him with the only tools that constituted her sinfulness. This was a mercy in action, not judgement.

Jesus, the incarnate Mercy of God utters no judgement against those whom the society looked and judged as sinners and limited them even from accessing the Merciful presence of God in the places of worship. This woman heard that Jesus was in the Pharisee's house and picked courage to come and meet Jesus face to face. And in turn, Jesus Christ let her touch him. You wonder what really was going on in the mind of Jesus! From His action it is clear that he was moved with mercy rather than Judgement. As the incarnate Mercy of God, His ministry was to communicate how Merciful God is, not how bad people are. It seemed that His love and mercy for the sinners attracted sinners to him, and they were relieved, they found consolation in Him and they listened to him. When people know that we love them without judgement, they feel free and are consoled by what we say to them.

A Christian should be the incarnate Mercy of Christ, just as Christ is the incarnate Mercy of God. In avoiding judging others, as the incarnate Mercy of Christ, a

Christian long to be to others what Christ has been to us. This is the task of being a Christian, it is a call to communicate how merciful God is, not how evil, sinners and bad people are. Christianity is a call to go to Christ so that we can go for Christ, it is a call to be to others what Christ has been to us. It is a call to be the instrument of God's mercy and love to the ends of the world.

A Judgemental Christian, his or her spiritual life is wanting. Reflecting on my own spiritual journey, I realize how patient and merciful God has been with me, and with this in mind, I strive to be patient and tender with those who are in the process of becoming. Every time I see our novices and Postulants struggling to keep with our monastic observances, making mistakes here and there, I look at them and smile and I say to myself, "They remind me of those days, when I too, staggered to reach where I am today."

The only way to overcome judging others, as once said by Lloyd John Ogilvie, is "to go deeper in God's Mercy. Calculate a new what God has to put up with, gone through, forgiven, repaired, and healed in your own life. Then you will find that a renewed sense of mercy will inadvertently fill you with mercy." We become tender with those who are also struggling in the process. Our task as Christian is to grow in the likeness of Christ, who, by word and deed, was the mercy of God in action. Since we're on a journey we need to learn to be patient with others as God has been with us. St. Benedict in his rule encourages his followers to bear patiently with others 'weaknesses of body and behaviour.

The sinful woman touched Jesus, and had her tears run down on his feet, and used her hair to wipe out his feet. Jesus didn't judge her, didn't rebuke her, indeed nowhere in the whole scripture has it been written that Jesus rebuked sinners who came to seek for his mercy. To those who condemned the adulterous woman, Jesus responded with the lengthy silence. When the message of silence didn't work, He strengthened himself up and having read their malice breed forth in their hearts, Jesus said, "The sinless among you to cast at her the first stone." To Simon who judged the woman silently, Jesus responded with a parable of the two debtors, who, upon their inability to settle their debt, their creditor cancelled their debts. "Which of them will love him more?" Jesus asked him. "The one, I suppose, whose large debt was forgiven." Simon replied.

What message does Jesus intend to communicate to this judgemental Jew? What message does Jesus intend to communicate to you and I, who are ardent Christians, consecrated men and women? It is to remind us of how blind we are when we judge others. Elsewhere Christ condemned the judgemental "pious" men and women of his time, and accused them of "seeking to remove a splinter out of the eye of the brother, while having a beam of log in their own eyes."

Judgement, more often than not, makes us "righteous", and categorises others in limiting "preconceptions", exposing their weaknesses, condemning their failures,

ridicule their inadequacy and by so doing, relegates them in the place, somewhere in the corner of the society where they feel useless and good for nothing. The counter force of judgemental attitude is love. If only we fill the vacuum of our hearts with the love for those “considered the weak, and when they know that they are loved without judgement, then like Christ, they will hear what our lives have to say to them. And what is the gospel of a Christian’s life? It is to communicate how much merciful and loving God is. It is to communicate how God has identified with us in our plight through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Mercy of God.

Should we then say nothing about others? Let us be clear that we do not suggest that we should say nothing about the sinful ways of our society, our friends or even ourselves. This is absolutely not the case. There is a positive side of judgemental attitude. A positive or constructive judgement, or rather, let us call it “positive criticism” is when the analysis and insights about someone serves the purpose of bettering his or her life. It is constructive or positive when we are willing to be part of God’s solution to lift someone from his or her social political and cultural, as well as spiritual mediocrity.

Positive judgement is preceded by awareness about what we want people to become in the whole of their lives before we criticise their present lives. Failure to which we unsettle people about the things they do, but give them little help with the kind of person they are to become. Jesus showed us the way. After he saved the adulterous woman from the raging men ready to stone her, and after saying to her, “Neither do I condemn you”, He also told her, “Go, and see that you sin no more.”

There was a novice in a certain religious community, who used to make a lot of mistakes in every place she was assigned to work at. Her formator could not stomach all these, and she became angry with her that she literally termed her a failure. When they were having formation meeting, she stood her ground and said that the novice is incompetent and not fit for that life. The superior, however, pleaded with the formator to be patient with this novice as she journeys with for another full year. Reluctantly the formator took the responsibility. She had already formed an attitude that the novice was a failure, and so she bothered less about her. The novice became frightened in the community, that even carrying a dish to the kitchen or table, would tremble until the cups and plates fell and broke. At this moment, the formator used to shout at her. The superior in her wisdom took the matter into her own hands and started journeying with this novice. In a period of six months, this novice had tremendously changed and she became exemplary good in the community that most of the members including her formator wondered what happened.

Negative judgement on the other hand, weakens and often leaves people immobilised for any constructive action. This is what we have seen in the story of this novice and the formator. It adds burden upon burden rather than lighten up the life of the other. Positive criticism or judgement demands responsibility of being tender the way we saw the superior become tender with the novice. By allowing the sinful woman to minister to him, Jesus sought to teach that negative judgement about others makes them so hostile, to the point of being excluded from sharing the love of God that is capable of changing them.

Surely, Christ does not condemn honest value-judgement between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, neither does he bid us abandon; in fact, we are called upon to pass judgement when things are not right. But the question is *with what kind of spirit do we evaluate the lives of others?* St. James cautions us to speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty (Cf. James 2:12). St. Paul admonishes us not to judge one another with an aim of being a stumbling block on other people's ways (Cf. Romans 14:13). Jesus Christ reminds us that we should not judge others so that we too, will not be judged. Elsewhere St. James said that "There would be judgement without mercy for those who have been merciless" (Cf. James 2:13).

Yes, people are wrong, others are bad, others are sinners or simply unfit according to our judgement. Like Jesus, they need someone who will believe and listen to them. Jesus was accused as one who ate and drank with sinners because in him, they found someone who listened to them and consoled them. Our calling as Christians and as ministers of God's mercy is to help others find a healing intimacy with God. This empowers them to see their lives in God's perspective, hence they receive the Holy Spirit to help them grow and change. We need to imitate our master who helped the adulterous woman to look to the future with hope and made a new start in her life.

As Christians, and as images of the invisible Christ, if we spent much time enabling people to "experience grace as we do criticise them, we could transform people", our families, our places of work and indeed our world. The puzzle remains, *why is it usually easier for us to criticise than help a person become a changed person?* I think, it is because we are blind of our own need of God's mercy. Perhaps we are insensitive to our own beams of wood in our own eyes, yet we stretch out our hands to remove splinters in others' eyes. Jesus said, "You Hypocrites! Remove the wooden beam from your eyes first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42)

CHAPTER FIVE

“AND WAS MOVED WITH PITY”

The History of salvation is a story of God seeking to intervene in the human situations, it is a story of God who incarnates Himself and gets involved by word and deed in the plight of humanity. Every Gospel passage is signed with God's mercy for His people. It is God who identifies Himself with the suffering humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus walked through villages and towns preaching in their synagogues the Good News, and as he cast out demons, cured the sick, and restored the blind, his eyes caught sight of the desperate crowd, broken and wounded by the human problems, harassed and maimed by the oppressive government and religious officials, as Mathew puts it...like sheep without a shepherd (Mathew 9:36ff). His tenderness had drawn out of hiding those who had been excluded from the public life like the lepers. His healing power had touched and restored sight to the blind, posture to the lame, speech to the dumb, normality to the possessed and health to the sick. The sinners were touched by the unconditional love of God. The voiceless like women now had found someone in whom they could be listened to. And they all looked desperately at Christ, for in Him, all found unconditional acceptance.

Jesus then called the twelve around him. He called people with different personalities. He called a man in the name of Simon Peter who was unstable, it was him who was ready to defend Jesus but also who would take off and later follow Jesus from afar. He called John, a young man who always leaned on the chest of his master. He called Simon the Zealot, perhaps one who thought of overthrowing the colonial rule by force as the only way to do things. He called Mathew the tax collector, a man whom, like Zacchaeus, the society did not love. He called Thomas called the Twin, a man with little faith. But also among the rank of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, the man who later betrayed him. These were really human beings, flesh and blood who had their own weaknesses, just like you and I, but it was upon these men that Jesus would entrust His mission.

He called them to community life, and having taught and served them, made them to accept and love each other, despite of their personal weaknesses. It is by being loving and tolerant to each other, that they would go out and be shepherds of the most vulnerable of the society. The key thing here is that He called them. But we are faced with the question, "why did He call them?" He called them in order to send them. He called them to Himself in order to send them and have them go on his behalf. Theirs, therefore, was a call to go to Christ in order to go for Christ. He called them from the rest of the people, not to keep them for himself, but to gift them out to the society for shepherding the lost Israel.

What does to be a Christian mean? A friend of mine and classmate who is a Muslim asked me, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" Has it ever crossed your mind that one day you stopped to ask yourself this same question the way I was asked by this Muslim? What is Christianity anyway? Why am I a Christian? Hans Kung has a book with the same title *Why Am I still a Christian?* You can read more from that work to see why [we] are Christians. What makes a good Christian? Is Christianity to be reduced to sheer moralism? For what reason am I consecrated to God through the evangelical counsels? What does my baptism and confirmation mean? Are we to think that our neighbour in the next door, who is

an excellent person and, in many ways, better than ourselves, is going to be condemned to hell just because is not a Catholic, or Christian or consecrated as we are? Are people going to be condemned to eternal hell simply because their passports to heaven aren't marked Christianity or Catholicism?

Just as God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, men and women in Christ become God to others. In other words, our aim of being Christians is to become like Christ to others, like Christ became for us. It is a calling to go to Christ in order to go for Christ. That having received the unmerited love and mercy of God, we seek to communicate how loving and merciful God is to the world.

The Christian Faith is a call to service. "I am among you as one who serves" (Cf. Luke 22:27c). Elsewhere, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and told them that he had given them an example. It was meant to be a roadmap, not just for the apostles but those who would follow after him.

At baptism we were initiated into the life Christ and the Church. At confirmation we were commissioned by Church and mandated to go on behalf of Christ, to bear witness for the love and mercy of Christ to the ends of the world. To whom were we sent? To the vulnerable of the society to be their strength in Christ.

There are those who are so vulnerable in our families, in our religious houses, in the neighbourhood. They could be the physically and mentally challenged brothers and sisters, whom, unless we stand and speak on their behalf, the strong ones take advantage of them. Victims of sexual harassment, victims of gender bias, Children and women who are on the receiving end of the domestic violence as well as civil wars, widows and orphans whose rights are violated by those in position and cable of manipulation, the reprobates of our society; the prostitutes, the homosexuals, and the Children on the street, commonly called street children, the refugees running away from hostile environment in their own countries, children and girls escaping from the oppressive cultural practices that otherwise violate their rights to dignified life. The victims of hunger who come knocking on our doors. These are they who are like the flock without a shepherd. These are they that should find Christ in our tenderness and love.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, commonly known as The Joy of the Gospel of Pope Francis, he once remarked that the Church, which is missionary in nature, should "share in the life of the poor – who are in any case the majority of its members – speak about what keeps them that way." Bishop Romero would add his voice on this matter that "the Church which is not united with the poor and does not denounce from the perspective of the poor the injustices committed against them – is not the true Church of Christ." Ours is a call to go out of our comfort zones and embrace and share in the very life of the society, to share in the joy but also sorrow and fears of the society. It is a call to get involved by word and deed in people's lives; to narrow the distance between

the poor and the rich. It is a call to touch Christ in the suffering and vulnerable brothers and sisters in the society. It is a call to see Christ in the aborted and abandoned children, bearing in mind the primacy of human life. Thanks be to God for the presence of men and women in the church who are committed to these works. These are they who make Christ's tenderness and love concrete in our lives, which is basically our call as Christians, that is, to manifest the love of Christ in the lives of others so that they don't remain like the sheep without a shepherd [Matt. 9:36].

CHAPTER SIX

HIS HEART WAS FILLED WITH PITY... AND KISSED HIM

A story is told of a man who was embarrassed by his wife in the Church. The story goes like this: in a certain village, a man married a very devoted wife, although himself was a lukewarm in faith. Every Sunday, before they went to Church, she strictly cautioned her husband, lest he behaved awkwardly during the service. One day, the man forgot to switch off his phone or to put it on silent mode, and during the Homily, his phone rung loudly which caused a stir in the church. The pastor stopped his sermon, and angrily ordered the person whose

phone had caused the stir to go out. The man tried to ask for pardon but the whole congregation shouted at him to leave the Church. This was a shameful and humiliating experience to this man and he walked out of the Church with tears in his eyes. Because of that incident his wife was remained to continue with the service but kept on weeping until the end of the service.

Coming home, she never gave the husband an opportunity to even utter a word but was furious at him, and started calling him all sorts of names that crossed her mind and strictly gave the husband a stern warning to be very careful next time he goes to the Church with the phone. The man, however, humiliated by the incidence swore never to go back to that Church. When evening came the man went to his favourite local restaurant and ordered his meal accompanied by a glass of wine. While he was eating, a glass slipped off his hand and broke into pieces. The wine also splashed on his expensive imported designer made suit. Embarrassed at this, he took out his handkerchief to wipe the table and his suit, but the waitress came apologizing and took a dry cloth, wiped the table and shifted him to the next table. She also brought him another glass full of wine with a smile and said, “Sorry Sir, here is another glass of wine for you. Don’t worry it was an accident, this is part of life. Enjoy your meal.” The other customers who were watching the drama came to him, gave him a pat on the back and told him all will be ok.

The man went home very much confused. Where should he belong? The Church that lacked forgiveness and love, or the restaurant that accorded him love? With this happening he kept on deliberating; *where do I belong? Where am I valued? Is it the Church or the restaurant?* The man came to this conclusion: *I would join the brotherhood of the restaurant because it exhibited the love of God more than the Church.*

Might be this is your story or a story of a friend. But here the challenge comes; what is more important? The stomach or the faith? We do not intent to canonize drinking, but the story has a great lesson.

In the Gospel of John 15, the parable of the prodigal son is the highest expression of God’s unbounded, unrestricted, unmerited, or unconditional mercy. The mercy of God cannot be described fully by our human language. The younger son in the parable, after selling his inheritance, left the home and travelled to a distant city, where he squandered all the money in a reckless living. When he was broke and without a home of his, he hired out himself to one of the citizens of the City, who sent him to feed his swine, and without food. St. John records that the man lowered himself to the level of the pigs when he decided to feed himself on the pods which the pigs ate. When he came back to his senses, he resolved to go back to his father in contrition. While he was still afar his father caught sight of him, his heart was filled with pity, he ran, hugged and kissed him and had a great feast to welcome him back (Cf. John 15:11 – 31).

In this episode see Joy and sadness. In the sadness part, we see this young man who freely walked away from the family, and in a sense, disowned his home. We are told that he sold his birth-right, and left. The same man came back home and his racks-like cloths marked a life without any accolade, without honour. The putrid cloths marked a life of brokenness, a life of sin and total mess. Nevertheless, he had come back to his senses and resolved to come back home, a place of unconditional Mercy.

On the joyful part of this parable it points out clearly that the Father's Mercy prevailed over judgement. As his son remorseful acknowledged his failures, he paid no attention; instead, he was concerned with clothing his son with dignity again. "Hurry! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet." This parable is closely linked with the episode where Jesus saved the adulterous woman. In both cases, what's central, as **Pope Francis** asserted in his Apostolic Letter quoted earlier, is not the law or legal justice, but the mercy of God personified in the figure of the merciful Father, which is capable of looking into the heart of each person and seeing the deepest desire hidden there; God's Mercy must take primacy over all else.

Like Jesus who "looked the woman in the eyes and read in her heart a desire to be understood, forgiven" and accepted, the merciful Father in the parable saw in the eyes of the son a desire to be understood, forgiven and be accepted back unconditionally. He thus clothed his son's sins with mercy and acceptance, and like Jesus, "his only judgement was one filled with mercy and compassion for the condition of this sinner."

We can summarize this chapter with the help of these beautiful words from Pope Francis: God is a careful and attentive Father, ready to welcome any person who takes a step or even expresses a desire to take a step that leads home. He is there, staring out the horizon, expecting us, waiting for us. No sin – however serious can prevail or limit" the Mercy of God." Let us analyse our situation first, lower our pride and walk home head-high.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I HAVE NO ONE TO PUT ME INTO THE POOL

A call needs to be heeded. One afternoon, on one of the busy streets of Nairobi; at the traffic light, stood a woman in a wheelchair. The traffic light allowing the pedestrian to cross the road blinked and begun to count. This lady in wheelchair hurriedly pushed herself across the road. When she had gone halfway, a handbag fell off from her laps and her belongings, a few coins and some documents jetted off from the bag. She looked at the timer and behold only four seconds were left to signal the furious vehicles to begin racing. She assumed the documents and silently in tears pushed herself across the road. The motorists in their cars of various sizes and colours, and various models from Suzuki maruti to Toyota VX, who were waiting for the red signals in their cars caught sight of her and everyone flung the doors of their cars open, and ran to collect the documents while others

helped to push her across the road. When she was safely off the road, she smiled at nodded her head with gratitude for the kindness shown to her by these strangers. Others pulled out their wallets and put some notes and coins in the bag of the woman. What shreds of tenderness shown to the woman!

In the gospel of John we read an episode where Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for a religious festival. And near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, there was a pool with special power, whose water came from a nearby source. It was believed that the Angel descended into the pool and stirred water, and the first person to enter after the movement would be healed. And so, besides the pool there lay a multitude of sick people: blind, lame and paralysed - all waiting for the angel of the Lord to descend, and they would each try to be the first to get into the water after the stirring, for the healing. But one man who had been sick for Thirty Eighty years caught the attention of Jesus. Jesus said to him, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." And Jesus told him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk" [Cf. John 5:1 – 18]. What a heart touching episode!

In the first story told above of a lady in the wheelchair at the traffic lights, her bag had fallen off. She looked at the timer, only four seconds were left. It would be not enough for her to collect all her spilt belongings and cross the road. She looked at both sides of the road, the motorists seemed impatient. She didn't want to cause traffic chaos. If she delayed, soon the impatient motorist would begin hooting at her to get off the road. She sighed heavily and hurriedly pushed herself across the road. To the contrary, people jetted off their cars and came and ministered to her with a lot of kindness. Others got off their wallets and gave her some money in various denominations. The lady smiled! These strangers, though seemed impatient, they still had some shreds of tenderness. Perhaps they were not all Christians. Perhaps they were not all Muslim's or Buddhist. Maybe some belonged to no religion. But they showed all kindness to this lady in the wheelchair.

Paralysis is a serious illness that can render someone partially or completely motionless or immobile. The man had been sick for thirty-eight years, St. John reports. When the man saw Jesus, he had no need to enter the pool because he had already entered the merciful heart of Jesus, full of healing and pardon. And the Mercy of the Father moved him to help him: "Do you want to get well... Rise, take up your mat, and walk." Interestingly, the Pharisees who had a keen eye on religion with their *Dos and Don'ts* came into conflict with the healed man. On retorted: "It is a Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But the man whom Jesus had healed replied, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" Then they asked, "Who is this man...?" This question was not only posed to know the man, but to add to their tally of accusations which

they would use against him. You See! There is nothing mentioned of the healing. They were not interested in the fact that the man had suffered for that good number of years and to be specific - thirty-eight years, one up to thirty-eight. This is a quite long period of suffering. For them the Law was the order of the day. And this we can smell from these words: "It is a Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat around."

The question that we are faced with is not whether Jesus was in violation of the Law of Moses, rather, that Jesus, by choosing to heal on a Sabbath he was returning the law to the original meaning. The laws were meant for people, not people for the law. The human situation holds primacy over the law. Mercy took primacy over the legality of the law. When nothing else could heal the man, the man who dispensed mercy to the full came and told him, "rise, pick up your mat and walk." Mercy lifted the man. When time did not allow the lady in the wheelchair to stop and put together all her belongings, mercy and kindness got incarnated into the strangers and they helped her. They cared less that time was up. Traffic laws were violated in order to show mercy, love and kindness to the lady in the wheelchair just as Jesus violated the Sabbath Laws in order to restore the physical health of the man.

In our surrounding day-to-day we meet people who are in dire need of our help. There is no one who is so self-sufficient or self-reliant that he or she would need no help from anyone. We are all indebted to other people's help at one or another time in a particular moment. We need to realize how important our Christian calling is. This is a reflection from the mystery of the cross, and how we live this mystery in our society.

In this world there are two categories of people. First, the guests; those, who, either through their making or naturally cannot take up any responsibility. They are guests in our houses; they have to be helped, they have to be entertained, they have to be oriented on the geography of our homes so that they be at home. These are people whom God puts in our lives so that we are able to put in service all the gifts and talents that God purposely put in us. Second in line are the Hosts. These are they who have experienced the meaning and the power of the cross, and are no longer guests, but sharers with God in partnership of hosting life for others. They are Christians, those who share in the name and mission of Christ. These two types of people are the kinds which **J. L. Ogilvie** talks about when he describes the people we meet in life.

Our call to be Christians is not just a moral task of straightening out people's thinking, rearranging their lives, giving advice or clarifying the Theological principles, rather it is letting God touch others through our availability and readiness to journey with others as we give them a listening ear, when we support them spiritually, morally, materially and even psychologically. It is a call to get involved in other people's lives, especially the one branded "guests" in a holistic

way. It is a call to abase ourselves if necessary and embracing other people's plight, share their joy, and sorrows, disappointments and successes. It is to let others experience God in totality.

Before baptism, we had a kind of spiritual paralysis, and like the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years, laid besides the pool waiting for someone to put him in, the blessed Trinity, overflowing with goodness, became incarnate in the person of Jesus; and "when the forgiving love of the cross healed us at the core, our abiding concern became for the vulnerable that God puts in our lives."

On the other hand, this writer Henry Drummond once commented that "to become Christlike is the only thing, in the world, worthy caring for, the thing before which every ambition of man is folly and all lower achievements vain." When we converse, share our experience, inquire into the well-being of others and their needs, patiently listen to the old, the challenged, and when empathy is seen in the joyous listening, as Christians, we will become irresistibly influential like Christ, since all those to whom and for whom Christ has called and commissioned us will find their voice in us, and they will come to know our master and they will be enlisted in our ranks. Our Christian calling has little or even nothing to do with criticising everyone and everything as if we were experts with the assignment of putting everyone and everything straight on every subject. It is primarily communicating our faith, and this faith is to proclaim how merciful our God is. It is becoming the hands with which He ministers to others. "I have no one to put me into the pool." Am I the one, are you the one, are we the ones to put people into the pool?

CHAPTER EIGHT

I AM NOT LIKE THIS TAX COLLECTOR

Many a times we point at people with one finger. The three always points back to us. What lesson do we learn from this? Jesus saw how superciliously the Pharisees were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. To them he addressed the parable of the two people who went to the temple to pray; a Pharisee and a tax collector.

"O God," the Pharisee prayed, "I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, and adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income." But the tax collector stood at a distance, and his face downcast prayed, "Be merciful to me a sinner" [Luke 18:9 – 14].

To the judgement of the Pharisee, he thought his prayer proved a holy person. Now we need to ask ourselves some few questions concerning Holiness. What is holiness? How is holiness attained? What is the formula for holiness? Isn't it the goal of every person to be holy? Isn't prayer, fasting, meditation, regular mass, daily devotion, monthly retreats, or recollection, yearly pilgrimages to the holy or sacred lands – a mark of pious life? Isn't religious life the perfect road to holiness than other forms of life? Isn't paying tithes, building the church and regular attendance of fellowship meeting and Small Christian Communities, the sure way to holiness? Aren't they free tickets to heaven?

When I was on holiday, I visited an old man in our neighbourhood. It had been long since I saw him. I realised that the man had grown old and weak to the extent that he could no longer attend mass. He was now living with a young man my friend and classmate with whom we aspired together to join religious life. What a joy to see and reunite with my old friends, both the old man and his grandson. We revisited old memories of childhood as the old man listened to us. Then, just something clicked on my mind, what happened to Mike that he never made it to join religious life? "Hey, Mike, what happened with your vocation?" I asked him. "O, my brother, it was hard for me to leave the old man alone. I sacrificed my vocation to care for the old man." He spoke. At this point, the old man then said, "Young men, long gone are the days when you could pop into someone's home and you have a meal. Those were the days, my sons, when an old man was a blessing to the community. At my age now, I would be surrounded by young boys and girls, all eager to live with grandpa. But see the society in which we live today, nobody cares that an old man lives! During our time, if you met an old man or woman on the road, it was your holy duty to help him or her reach home safely. But today I tell you, things have really changed which I can't explain to the detail. Today you go into a place you might end up standing while the young one sits.

My encounter with my old friends, Mike and his grandfather opened me to the new reality, the new understanding of what Holiness is all about. Mike dropped his search for God through religious life to take care of his ageing lonely grandfather. And the grandfather shared his experience of his world that only existed in his memory: the world when old men and women were blessings in the family, a world where grandchildren longed to stay with and to take care of their aged grandparents, and a world where young people felt it a divine duty to help the old people cross the busy roads, offer their seats in public vehicles, and the world where the whole family and society took it a moral obligation to serve the poor aged people.

It is not "the seed of faith you plant" that counts. It is not about how many retreats you have averagely attended in your life. It is not about how many devotions you pray daily. It is not about how many masses you celebrate daily. It is not about

how intelligent you are. It is not about how many people praise your homilies or sermons. Holiness and therefore, communicating our faith is about how many lives you have touched. If spent our lives taking care of those who could not care for themselves like Mike, equals our true search for holiness.

Holiness, that goal of spiritual life is not about the self; the purposes of spiritual life and spiritual exercises are about being concerned with the life of the other. Our spiritual exercises should make us sensitive to the needs of the world. Pilgrimages, meditations, regular prayers and fasting, if they do not open our eyes and hearts to see and love the other as Jesus did, we do them for vain glory. Sr. John Chittister spells it out clearly the purpose of spiritual life as “becoming the self that sees life through the eyes of Jesus and then, like Jesus, bends to become the miracle the world awaits.”

Holiness is about imitating our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who spent his entire life, travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Samaria and other parts of his world, curing the sick, raising the dead, consoling the mourners like Mary and Martha, and combating the naive religious leaders who esteemed legality to be greater than the needs of the people. Abba Epiphanus once said, “God sells righteousness very cheap to those who are eager to buy: namely, for a little piece of bread, worthless clothes, a cup of cold water and one coin.” Upon these little things Jesus will one day say, “You did it to me.”

The modern Christian looks for a way to lead a pious life. There those who would prefer religious life to family life as the best way to serve God. There is also a tendency for those in religious life to think superciliously about family life. This attitude, beneath it, is a Pharisaic boastful and arrogant posture before God. The Pharisee failed to understand that all good deeds alone put together cannot lay any claim to salvation.

To finish up this part, once there was an old man with his younger son. And the younger son who wanted to be perfect was afraid to make wrong choices in life, one day he approached his old pious, intelligent and pious father with a religious sensitivity, and asked him, “Here are two people. One never leaves the Church, spends longer hours in meditation and prayer. He never misses mass. He fasts every Friday and he will never take meat on Fridays. While the other person serves the sick in the hospital and he feels hurt whenever a patient die. Among these two people whose work is more acceptable by God?” The old man looked left and right, wrapped in a deep thought, then looked his son straight in the eye and gave out this reply: “even if the person who abstains from eating meat every Friday or the whole week, and stays longer in meditation and attends all masses in the world were to hang himself with the nose on the altar, can never equal the servant of the sick. The servant of the sick serves Christ himself.” No amount of fasting without being sensitive to the needs of those who cannot serve themselves is a sure way to holiness.

From the story of the Pharisee, we do not have the yardstick for holiness the way he pointed at his own deeds which were only on the outer side. Holiness should come from within because it is our God who sees what lies deep down in us.

CHAPTER NINE

“AND JESUS WEPT”

A certain friend of mine, a priest and a classmate in seminary, called me. We shared stories and made idle chats from one topic to another. Then from nowhere I asked him, “Father, now that you are a priest, how do you feel?” “My brother,” he said, “it is not easy to be a priest.” “What do you mean?” I asked. “A week after my ordination, I was appointed the Chaplain to the local hospital in the neighbourhood. That same week, as inexperienced as I was, I received a call from the hospital to go and anoint a certain sick man in the hospital, who had been involved in a fatal road accident. Joyfully I said to myself: ‘here I am going to do what I have been assigned to do in this hospital. I packed the necessary things that I needed for the service and I left and headed to the hospital. On reaching the reception desk the nurse who called me whispered to me: ‘Father please, remember to give a consoling word to the wife and children who are deeply worried about the state of their father.’ After whispering to me to give a consoling

word to the family, the nurse gave a sigh and told me: ‘we are sorry, we have lost the man a few minutes before you arrived, and the family is weeping uncontrollably. Please now, come with me and console them.’ This brought total confusion and I didn’t know where to start from or which word to utter first, because this just replayed the experience I had a month ago, when I lost my dad. Everything came a fresh to me and I felt as if I was numb. But the nurse assured me, ‘Father, let us go.’

As I reached the wife and the children of the man, I introduced myself and I told them that “I been called to anoint your husband, and the father of your children but now he is no more.” What I had planned to tell the old man and his family evaporated from my mind. It was total confusion, and I felt embarrassed. What followed was tears falling down my cheeks. I felt guilty and a failure. I could not help but allowed my tears to roll down my cheeks. With that nothing ever came to my mind. We sat silently until evening came. Then suddenly the wife stopped crying, and she turned to me and said ‘Father, thank you for being with us in this trying time. We appreciate your coming.’ With those words I started nodding aimlessly not knowing that she meant what she said. I left the hospital, went back to the house, I sank heavily in bed but my eyes remained open the whole night till morning. Two days later, the widow called me and informed me that the family was requesting that it was their wish if I could the one to bury the dead man. On that day, I tried to give a consoling message to the family but I felt so empty. When everything was over at around 2:30 pm, the widow walked up to me and said: ‘Father, as a family we are so humbled that you found time to be with us since the time our loved one left us to this end. Thank you very much for that spirit.’ What is this story driving us to? The story is point us to the death of Lazarus.

The way the priest received the message, was the same way Jesus Christ received the message from Martha and her sister about the illness of their brother Lazarus. It was a message from the people who were dear to him. The message goes: “Master, the one you love is ill.” Jesus, however, did not take an action. He stayed two more days, after which, he disclosed to his disciples that their “friend” Lazarus was dead and he was going to wake him up.

When Martha heard that Jesus was on the way coming to their home, she went and waited for him. Mary remained at home with the relatives who had come to console with them. When Martha saw Jesus, she said to him with a hopeless voice, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They expected him, and had faith that his coming would heal their brother. But he was late. He arrived four days after the burial. Mary too, when she heard that Jesus was outside, she ran to him and falling at his feet, like Martha her sister voiced her hopelessness. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Their message was “*Lord, you are too late. He is gone.*”

When Jesus saw Mary and Martha weeping together with those who had come to console with them, he was perturbed and deeply troubled, and asked where he had been buried. “Sir, come and see,” they said. And Jesus wept! And the Jews who were weeping said, “See how he loved him.” Others shared the sentiments of Mary and Martha, “Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?” [John 11: 1ff]

Like the priest in the presence of the bereaved family unable to say anything, allowing himself to comfort them with tears, Jesus wept together with those who had lost their beloved one, his friend Lazarus. Though God and capable of restoring life, Jesus shared the pain of losing a loved one. My friend, a priest, uttered no word, but allowed himself to weep with the weeping. Sometimes in moments such as like this, words ostensibly become meaningless. The presence alone is enough to offer consolation beyond measure. “Thanks, Father, for being with us in this trying moment, your presence has strengthened us and given us hope.” The widow said.

I was reading a book by Henri J. M. Nouwen, “*The wounded Healer*” and I came across a very fascinating conversation taken from the *Tractate Sanhedrin*. In it, is a true identity of the merciful Jesus at the service of the poor. Jesus, who is busy binding the wounds of the broken ones. This incident, I take it as Jesus who is able to console with those in different situations of life, and him, who is worth being imitated by us.

There is an incidence whereby

“Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeron ben Yohai’s care... He asked Elijah: ‘When will the Messiah come?’ Elijah replied, “Go and ask him yourself.” “Where is he?” “Sitting at the gate of the City.” “How shall I know him?” “He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind their all wounds at the same time and then binds them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds them up again...”

Ours is always a search for the presence of the Lord in our midst. When will he come? He has already come! Where is he? He is out there in the cold sitting with the poor, and the homeless. He is out there sitting among the wounded the way Rabbi Yoshua bin Levi was directed by prophet Elijah, wiping and bandaging the wounds of the broken. He is in the hospitals where many utters their first words as well their last words as they enter and exist this physical life respectively. He is in the prisons where many have given up the hope for freedom. He is in the city corridors where children play between the walls. He is in the villages among the lonely aged, isolated and abandoned and forgotten to die alone. Jesus is in the homes of Marys and Marthas who are mourning their loved ones. He is among them weeping with those who are weeping.

It is a common experience, it seems, that loss of our beloved ones: husband or wife or children or friends, as well as job, or even our own health either draws us closer to God or sends us away from Him. When my dad died, this loss drew me closer to God. On this day that my dad died, my mother wept the whole night, and at the end, she prayed that his soul may rest in peace, and prayed for God's divine intervention and providence for we had no one else to look at for our needs. However, I still remember a priest who presided over the burial ceremony of our dad kept coming every weekend to be with us and to pray with us. And with this, we felt loved and cared and belonged to a Church that really was concerned. This is why we grieve with the grieved.

According to Mathew Linn, Denis and Sheila Fabricant, in their book *Healing the Greatest Hurt*, they asserted that at spiritual level, grief brings us either closer to God or drives us further away from God. For instance, when the victims cling to resentment towards themselves, others and God, because of the loss, they remain depressed and unable to work through their grief. On the other hand, when they find someone who is able to journey with them at the moment of loss of their loved ones: husband, wife or child, their own health or job, someone who is concerned, they are drawn closer to God and they become prayerful asking God to fill their emptiness. This experience of loss draws them closer to God because they know their need for God, and allow God to love them in the midst of their grief.

When they cannot find a God of love in the midst of grief – the chances are that they would develop psychological problems and later might lead to depression. In other cases, people become antireligious or they become Pseudo-atheists. They would question: *where is this God of love?* That priest kept coming home to pray with us, to encourage us and to show us he that he was part of us in our loss. This is why it is beautiful to be around the people who have lost their loved ones.

By these words; *you are dust and to dust you shall return*, the mourning of the loved ones does not end there. In the case of Mary and Martha, their relatives stayed with them for more days after the burial. We are told that Jesus came four days after the burial to console with them and to raise up Lazarus. I recall a year later, after the death of my dad, our mother still wept. Some of us, I mean my siblings were uncooperative. And this made my mother to weep bitterly uttering sentiments like "*I wish your father were alive.*" When we went to school and were send home for school fees, and when our mother was unable to raise the money, we grieved the loss of our dad.

What does this tell us? It has been argued that before we heal or recover from the loss, we may have to grieve many times not just for a past loss, but for the present too. For example, and in the case of my mother, a widowed person is not finished when grieving the loss of a spouse. Months later grief might resurface, but this time it is for loss of a parenting partner for uncooperative children, loss of a

physical intimacy, loss of a breadwinner as bill piles up and loss of a listener – one who listens without judging you because he or she knows you.

So, when Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi asked Elijah this question, *when will the Messiah come*, we as Christians tend to do the same using our various languages, it might not be voiced or pronounced loudly but at the moments of loss, we miss a God of mercy to console with us. Elijah answered Yoshua ben Levi, “*He has already come. He is sitting at the gates of the City. He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds, and is binding them.*” We are called to be the incarnate consolation of God to be among the grieving, weeping with those who weep. “Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted.” How shall God comfort them unless we become the instruments of God’s consolation to those who mourn? I think that, as Christians, leaving those who have lost their loved ones immediately the burial is done is lack of compassion. They need us more and more. And we are the hands with which God touches the grieving, the heart with which God loves them at their grief, and the eyes with which God sees their needs.

CHAPTER TEN

“MOVED WITH PITY... HE TOUCHED HIM”

One lovely Saturday evening as two pastors were driving along one busy street of Nakuru town in Kenya, a lady in compromising fashion stopped them for a lift. They were in clerical collars and therefore the lady was not mistaken that they were men of God. Wondering who the lady could be, they stopped and the pastor on the steering wheel unwound his window down and asked the lady, “Hi, madam, how can I be of help to you?” “I beg for a lift please, am on my way home.” He turned and looked at his fellow pastor, who shook his head in protest. “Why should we not help her?” He asked. “It is clear Reverent Pastor that she is a harlot. Can’t you see the provocative clothes she is putting on? Besides, we are men of God, what would people think of us when they see this lady in our car?” But the pastor on the steering wheel assumed his fellow pastor and ushered in the lady.

As the lady entered the car, the pastor at the co-driver’s seat remained silent all the way, while the pastor on the steering wheel continued to converse with the

lady. Almost ten kilometres away from where they picked the lady, she told them that she would alight at the next bus stop. Before she approached her destination, she thanked them for bringing her safely to her destination. On reaching her destination, she stepped down and crossed the road and went away beyond the buildings were there.

Back to the two pastors now alone, the silent pastor started talking and retorted: "How could you do that pastor? This was a total scandal." The pastor on the steering wheel responded smilingly. "Dear Pastor, how else could we demonstrate the unbounded love of God practically? In your judgement she seemed to be a harlot, but she, too, is a child of God in need of God's mercy and love. We need to embrace people like her and not to exclude and avoid them. By doing so, they learn how loving, merciful and close our God is. Again, in our sinfulness, before we were saved, we were worse than this woman. Even as we talk, we still fall into sin daily. By condemning and refusing to give her a lift, we hide our own wounds, the scars of our sins. If I offended you by offering lift to the lady, am sorry." "Oh, no, I am also sorry my brother. Pray for me for God's mercy." The judgemental pastor responded.

The sad part is, in that story the two pastors dared not to ask the lady what she was doing in life. She might have been a harlot the way the judgemental pastor thought her to be. She might have been a lovely mother and wife of a pastor like him. Or she even she might have been a pastor herself running a multinational congregation. Or she might have been one who was planning to join their church. Am I judgemental or not? Because her identity was not clear like the identity of the leper we are going to talk about.

Jesus, while going about his usual business of preaching and casting out demons in Galilee came upon a leper whom he never judged as the pastor judged the lady in our story. At the presence of Jesus, the leper knelt down and begged him saying, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Jesus was moved with pity, and stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." Jesus told him [Cf. Mk 1:40 – 45].

According to the Mosaic law, lepers had to be excluded from the city and from the encampment [Cf. Lev. 13:45 – 46] to places that were deserted, cast out, and declared impure. That was where the lepers were relegated to. They were to have a bell for alerting the people of their presence. Other than physical suffering, that is, leprosy, they suffered loneliness and exclusion. As Toniel was interviewing Pope Francis he had this to say: "the leper was not just a victim of illness, but also felt guilty, as if he were being punished for his sins. The intention of the law that pitilessly cast out the lepers was to avoid contamination: the healthy needed

to be protected.” And that is why because of the law they had to wear bells so that they can warn people prior to their arrival in their midst.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, looked into the eyes of this leper kneeling before him, and saw the heavy burden that those whom the law excluded like him, and the society isolated their midst, pushed to deserted places where no one can hear their cry and feel the deep longing for love. He was moved with pity, reached out his hand, touched him, and healed him. Jesus who represented the healthy of his time was not afraid of being contaminated. The right of the law oppressed those already burdened with the suffering of the illness. That was the spirit of the law. But here Jesus come with a new norm, which does not do away with the mosaic one, but that puts the former into perspective. This Jesus’ new norm is what Pope Francis calls, “The logic of God” who is mercy and who desires for the salvation of all.

Talking about pity, Mark puts it out clearly in this phrase: “He was moved with Pity.” Jesus touched the leper, healed and brought him back to the society that had earlier rejected him, and that is why he said, *“Go and show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will proof for them.”* Because of mercy showed to this man by Jesus whom he healed, the leper, who was formerly marginalised, the one who dwelt outside the city, outside the encampments, was now a new man (healthy) and now ready to be received within his community.

Jesus going against the norm of that particular time, he touched the leper, touched the outcast, touched the forbidden and healed the one had this tag. Jesus, by his merciful and loving gesture, demonstrated the nature and identity of God, the “one who welcomes embraces and transfigures evil into good, transforming and redeeming” the sinner, “transmuting condemnation to salvation.”

I hope our story of the two pastors and the lady is still stuck in your mind. “She is a harlot!” The man told his fellow pastor. “What will people think of us when they see her sitting calmly in our car?” We have a tendency of protecting our identity at all costs from being contaminated by those deemed to be “impure.” This underlines the attitude of the Pharisees who kept the law to letter but neglected mercy. How can those who are outside by virtue of sin know and experience the mercy of God unless we allow them to be in contact with us. By touching the leper, Jesus is teaching us to dive deep into the darkness, the night in which so many of our brothers and sisters live. We need to make contact with them and let them feel our closeness, without letting themselves be wrapped up in that darkness and be influenced by it.

Although the lady seemed to be a harlot, here this man was a leper with no doubt, and Jesus knows it. By touching him he would be contaminated, Jesus knew it because the law decreed it. But Jesus touched the leper and immediately the leprosy left him, the way the pastor on the driver’s wheel touched the mind of the

judgemental pastor and the harlot figure in his mind left him. We might say that the judgemental pastor suffered from *mental leprosy*. Jesus is so close to God that His touch can cleanse even the worst impunity. The attitude of that pastor who refused to point a finger that *she was a harlot* demonstrated something fundamental in our Christian life and calling. That caring for those whom the society considers the outcast and sinners is a logic of Christ who reaches out to everyone. We, too, by caring for them, offering them a lift, giving them a glass of water, welcoming them on our compounds and our places of worship, is an expression of sharing our experience of mercy, which we ourselves have experienced from our Lord.

“We hide our own wounds, the scar of our sins.” What a beautiful admonition of the pastor to his fellow shepherd. In our thinking of others as sinners, and ourselves as better than them, we stand reproached by the Lord with same strong words he told the Pharisees: those who kept the law to the letter but harboured evil in their hearts. Jesus likened them to “The white sepulchre” who appeared devout from the outside but hypocrites on the inside.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IF YOU KNEW THE GIFT OF GOD...

In a certain village, a man worked in the hospital as a nurse. One day as he went about doing his duty, he came across a child dumped and abandoned in the dustbin. He was moved with pity for the Child. He figured out how to help the child, but he found no better option than to take the boy child into his house. That evening when he arrived home with a little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, his wife was surprised. She looked at the child that was throwing up his hands aimlessly and then looked at the man who stared at her. She left the man in the seating room and went to her bedroom, closed her door and wept bitterly. The man boiled some milk, fed the child and prepared the child to sleep. When he went to the bedroom, he found his wife in tears. He tried to explain but his wife was too emotional that she could not understand.

A week went by without speaking to each other. The man hired a house girl to take care of the child. On the second week, when he came back from work, he told the wife that they needed to talk. He explained to her that he only adopted the child but not the way she thought, that perhaps he had impregnated a woman out there and brought the child to him. The woman did not believe. The child grew up in the family but his adoptive mother created a very hostile environment

for him to live peacefully. She overburdened him with a lot of chores that the child hardly had time to do his homework. She would go out with her own two children leaving home this poor boy with all home duties. The man saw all the injustices done to the boy but felt helpless. He was afraid to break up his marriage.

By the grace of God, the boy finished high school and joined the university abroad. He studied medicine as a neurosurgeon, and was employed in one of the hospitals abroad. Meanwhile, fifteen years later, his adoptive mother fell ill and she needed operation. The local hospitals referred her abroad for operation. The case was complicated. She had developed a clot in an area between the brains. All the doctors who studied her medical report declined to carry out the operation, terming it dangerous. They had to consult Johnson, the senior neurologist. When the report came to his table, he was surprised. "Jane Austen Rachael." It was a familiar name. He ran into the ward where she had been admitted. He looked with pity to the woman, laying helplessly on bed. He studied the case, carried out several tests, took several X-rays and at last decided to give a trial in order to save the woman. Thanks be to God. After a week of battle, Dr. Johnson managed to combat the illness to an end. When the woman woke up, she saw her husband sitting on the edge of the bed, holding a paper in his hands in tears. She automatically knew that the bill was higher than expected. However, when the woman took the piece of paper and looked at it, the bill had been fully settled and signed in these words: "It was nice experiencing an opportunity to reciprocate the mercy that I received while I lived at your home. Yours adopted son, Dr. Johnson Austen.

Jesus came down from Judea to Galilee through Samaria. Wearied with the journey, he sat down at the well. Then a Samaritan woman came to fetch water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." A woman was surprised that a Jew asked her for a drink. Scholars have argued that the Samaritans and the Jews could not meet. The Jews considered the Samaritans as outcasts, and the impure race that intermarried with the Gentiles. They had nothing in common. They worshipped at the shrine on Mt. Gerazin while the Jews worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem. Scholars have furthered argued that the Jew would not use the cup or bowl used by the Samaritan. But Jesus said to the woman, "Give me a drink." "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" she said.

By this response the woman already drew a clear line of demarcation that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. They were two irreconcilable tribes. But Jesus challenged her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."¹ And the story went on, until she became an apostle to the Samaritans who were happy to experience the salvation of God.

¹ Cf John 4:1 – 45

The Jews despised the Samaritans and treated them with contempt as outcasts and impure people, those who were outside the paths of salvation. In the like manner, in the story of Dr. Johnson Austen, he was treated as an outsider and hence suffered in the house of Mrs. Austen Rachel. He was an outsider and in the eyes of Rachel, there was no tie with the family. He merited for nothing. He laid no legitimate claim in the family. It was only mercy that reconciled the rift between Dr. Johnson and Miss Rachel.

In the gospel passage, the story of the Samaritan woman demonstrates how the mercy of God moves Him to take the first initiative to reach out to others, to the oppressed, those considered impure and outcasts, he touches them in mercy, and transfigures their social status, making them too, His legitimate sons and daughters. Our Lord Jesus Christ, in this gesture of mercy invites us to be missionaries of mercy. He invites as echoed in the words of Pope Francis, to be a Church that goes forth, the church that reaches out to those who are outside, and whom the society derides and pushes to the peripheral.

In the history of the Missionary Benedictine of St. Ottilien, when Fr. Andrea Amrhein approached his Abbot and shared with him his vision of Monastic life coupled with missionary activities, his idea was dismissed as an impossible and inconceivable reality. However, Amrhein was convinced of monastic life that goes forth to reaches out to others in the spirit of the Lord's mandate "Go out into the whole world and preach the gospel."

In order to share with others, the loving Mercy of God that is unbounded, unlimited and infinite, it is necessary to go out: "to go out from the Church and the parishes, to go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope." The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman is a perfect image of God who goes out of "the comfort zone" and in mercy reaches out to console them. In our own culture, women do felt water in the early hours of the day. Contrary, in the narration, it seems that this woman came to fetch water at noon. Why? Other than being a Samaritan, this woman also suffered from humiliation. Jesus reveals that she had been married to five husbands. Perhaps she was afraid of mockery from other women, whose husbands she had snatched. But the encounter with Jesus, the incarnate Mercy of God transformed and changed her moral and social status. The experience of mercy set her free and she freely became the herald of the Good News to her kinsfolk. "Come and see a man who told me everything that I have done." She said.

The Church that goes forth, the Roman Pontiff said, "exists where there is combat, it is not a solid structure with all the equipment where people go to receive treatment for both small and large infirmities. It is a mobile structure that offers first aid and immediate care, so that its soldiers do not die. It is a place for urgent care, not a place to see a specialist. It is the church that goes forth for those who

are wounded, who are in need of an attentive ear, understanding, forgiveness and love.”

We live in the society where everyone is busy with his or her work. In families, some parents have no time for their children, because they are married to their work. Children suffer and have many questions that no one has time to listen to. In our places of work, our daily routine and indeed the relationship between workers and managers or “bosses” is defined by delivery. Nobody cares the state of another one. In our learning institutions, teachers are concerned with delivering the content, their hard working and teamwork spirit is motivated by finishing up the syllabus in time. Some teachers hardly pay attention to the psychological and even spiritual state of the learner. They are faced with many challenges and have no one to look to. In the parishes, the common Christian has more questions; they yearn for someone to talk to. More often do ministers in the parish finish mass, enter their vehicles and drive away. Or they enter into their rooms leaving their Christians desperate like the flock without a shepherd.

Today, we have many people running from and to all directions looking for someone to console them. This is the reason why soothsayers, fortune-tellers, false prophets and preachers have emerged. People are looking for someone to listen to them, someone willing to grant them time, listen to their stories of joy and sorrows of life, the difficulties and successes they encounter in life. Reaching out to others in this situation is an apostolate of the ear that needs no ministerial priesthood. Everyone can do this! “If only you knew the gift of God.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“HAVE MERCY ON ME GOD”

Once upon a time in certain village there lived a man with his family. They had a pot that was believed to possess some supernatural powers. The man had received it from his grandparents and had been passed on to many generations. In order to guard it against breakage and in order to hand it successfully to others, the man told his four children that the pot possessed the secrets of the whole clan, and was always guarded by the spirits of the ancestors. And whoever would break the pot will be burned alive by whole clan. For many days his children guarded the pot with a lot of care and reverence. One day, while the old man was on a journey, the younger son accidentally knocked the pot down and it broke to pieces. The elders of the community arrested the son, and took him to the Chief and laid accusations against him. “This young man” they said, “has broken the sacred pot of our community which has been handed down to us from many generations past. Our ancestors decreed that whoever broke the pot is liable to be burned alive to appease the spirits. Therefore, we bring him to you that you give us the permission to carry out what our ancestors decreed to us.”

The chief looked at the terrified boy kneeling before him with his hands tied behind him with his face cast on the ground. He looked at the angry crowd, and in his wisdom told them a story. “A man lived with his neighbour who had an orchard. A guest visited the man, and upon seeing the fruits, the visitor entered

the orchard and ate the fruits of the neighbour, thinking that they belonged to his host. The neighbour caught the man and brought him to his host.” At this point, the chief paused and asked the crowd: “Who do you think should be punished? The guest or the host?” The Crowd then shouted “The host for he failed to tell his guest.” Then the Chief said, “This young man before us is just an innocent guest who do not understand neither the importance of the pot nor does he understand the nature of the punishment you are bringing upon him. The ancestors are angry with you more than they are with this young man. Therefore, in order that the spirits of the ancestors be appeased I decree that you all be burned alive.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

SUSANA FALSELY ACCUSED AND CONDEMNED

“There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Jo’akim. And he took a wife named Susanna, the daughter of Hilki’ah, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. Her parents were righteous, and had taught their daughter according to the law of Moses. Jo’akim was very rich, and had a spacious garden adjoining his house; and the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honoured of them all.

In that year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: “Iniquity came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people.” These men were frequently at Jo’akim’s house, and all who had suits at law came to them.

When the people departed at noon, Susanna would go into her husband’s garden to walk. The two elders used to see her every day, going in and walking about, and they began to desire her. And they perverted their minds and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering righteous judgments. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to possess her. And they watched eagerly, day after day, to see her.

They said to each other, “Let us go home, for it is mealtime.” And when they went out, they parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each

pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. And then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was very hot. And no one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, "Bring me oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I may bathe." They did as she said, shut the garden doors, and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; and they did not see the elders, because they were hidden.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders rose and ran to her, and said: "Look, the garden doors are shut, no one sees us, and we are in love with you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

Susanna sighed deeply, and said, "I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing, it is death for me; and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands. I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord."

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. And one of them ran and opened the garden doors. When the household servants heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. And when the elders told their tale, the servants were greatly ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Jo'akim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. They said before the people, "Send for Susanna, the daughter of Hilki'ah, who is the wife of Jo'akim." So, they sent for her. And she came, with her parents, her children, and all her kindred.

Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement, and beautiful in appearance. As she was veiled, the wicked men ordered her to be unveiled, that they might feed upon her beauty. But her family and friends and all who saw her wept.

Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head. And she, weeping, looked up toward heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord. The elders said, "As we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids. Then a young man, who had been hidden, came to her and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness, we ran to them. We saw them

embracing, but we could not hold the man, for he was too strong for us, and he opened the doors and dashed out. So, we seized this woman and asked her who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify."

The assembly believed them, because they were elders of the people and judges; and they condemned her to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, "O eternal God, who dost discern what is secret, who art aware of all things before they come to be, thou know that these men have borne false witness against me. And now I am to die! Yet I have done none of the things that they have wickedly invented against me!"

The Lord heard her cry. And as she was being led away to be put to death, God aroused the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel; and he cried with a loud voice, "I am innocent of the blood of this woman.

All the people turned to him, and said, "What is this that you have said?" Taking his stand in the midst of them, he said, "Are you such fools, you sons of Israel? Have you condemned a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? Return to the place of judgment. For these men have borne false witness against her."

Then all the people returned in haste. And the elders said to him, "Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you that right." And Daniel said to them, "Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them."

When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, "You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, pronouncing unjust judgments, condemning the innocent and letting the guilty go free, though the Lord said, 'Do not put to death an innocent and righteous person.' Now then, if you really saw her, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under a mastic tree."^[b] And Daniel said, "Very well! You have lied against your own head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut^[c] you in two."

Then he put him aside, and commanded them to bring the other. And he said to him, "You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has deceived you and lust has perverted your heart. This is how you both have been dealing with the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not endure your wickedness. Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under an evergreen oak."^[d] And

Daniel said to him, "Very well! You also have lied against your own head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to saw[ε] you in two, that he may destroy you both."

Then all the assembly shouted loudly and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they rose against the two elders, for out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; and they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbour; acting in accordance with the Law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus, innocent blood was saved that day.

And Hilki'ah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, and so did Jo'akim her husband and all her kindred, because nothing shameful was found in her. And from that day onward Daniel had a great reputation among the people." (Susanna, Chapter 13 of the Greek Version of Daniel, New Revised Standard Version, The Fully Revised and Updated, Harper Collins Study Bible, A New Annotated Edition By The Society of Biblical Literature, 2006)

Just look at this scenario, Susanna with her relations, what a shame in front of them from the look of things. If it was you and I could you have dared tell even one of them what you were to face, or you would have gone to the assembly and square it alone behind their backs because of shame? Am just trying to picture these two old men giving out their allegation I am sure they were nodding to each other to affirm their lies. With their social status, the assembly had to believe them.

If we relate the above story and our present society, have thing really changed much? Haven't you heard of a man or woman rotting in jail over false accusations against him or her? Haven't you heard or seen a lady or young man losing job because of sexual harassment at place of work?

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